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NEWSLETTER

Gardening Myths

By Deb Lebow Aal, Wild Ones Front Range Chapter

I love being asked to look at people’s yards. I am not a professional landscaper, but I read gardening books like they’re novels, and from many years of gardening I know enough to give some advice. I frequently hear garden myths that I am reluctant to rebut on the spot, but here I am going to – if not dispel some of these – at least highlight a side of these “truths” that may be detrimental to good, sustainable, gardening. I am NOT a scientist. This information is from sources I’ve read, permaculture and other courses I’ve taken, and my experience as a gardener.



Needles from Pine Trees Acidify Your Soil

No, they don’t. A common misconception is that since pine needles from pine trees are acidic, they will acidify your soil. Fresh pine needles taken directly from a tree are slightly acidic. However, they don’t stay that way. By the time pine needles drop off a tree, they are barely acidic, and after a few days on the ground, are not acidic at all. Scientists have looked under 50-year old pine trees, with fifty years of dropped pine needles, and the soil underneath the tree is not acidic. It turns out that adding pine needles to top-dress your soil is a good thing. They will help enrich your soil. I like them as mulch because they stay in place.

Always Deadhead Your Perennials

Once a plant’s blooms are past their prime, the plant directs its energy towards producing seed and fruit. Conventional advice is to deadhead – or remove spent blooms – so that the plant can direct its energy, instead, to producing more blooms, foliage, and roots. While it is true that deadheading some perennials will give you a second bloom, that is not always good advice. Leaving your spent blooms on your plants is good for wildlife, and, in my opinion, is

very pretty and adds winter interest. If you always deadhead perennials, you are robbing birds and insects of important shelter and food. Also, letting seed fall to the ground encourages self-seeding which may be desirable. That said, cutting some perennials back in the spring as they start “waking up” can make the plant stronger and avoid legginess, but that is not the same as deadheading.

Wood Chip Mulch Takes Nitrogen Away from Your Soil/Plants

Well, yes and no. Wood has a high carbon to nitrogen ratio. So, for wood to decompose, it needs to take nitrogen from somewhere. The early stages of wood decomposition are aided by fungi, which add nitrogen to the wood by taking some from the top inches of soil. This is done above most plant roots, so it will not affect your plants, unless they are seedlings. Wood chips are not recommended for vegetable gardens for this reason. When bacteria enter the process, they pull nitrogen from the surface of the soil; again, this does not affect your plants. In the later stages of decomposition, wood chips actually add nitrogen to the soil.

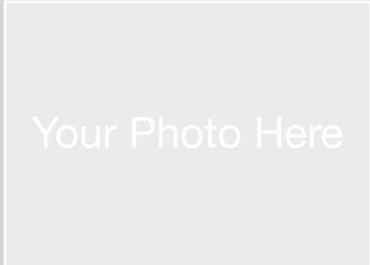
So, really, the amount of nitrogen taken by fresh wood chips is negligible, and wood chips will not affect the amount of nitrogen in your soil. That said, many native plants will do better in a pea gravel as opposed to wood mulch, likely because pea gravel keeps their crowns dry, which most CO native plants like, and is closer to their natural habitat.

I will add that wood chip mulch that comes packaged in plastic bags, and/or dyed red or dark brown, should not be used. I am not sure what the dye does, but it can’t be good. Try to get your wood mulch from local tree services, who may give it to you free, or in bulk, so that you are not dealing with plastic bags.

Gravel Mulch is Too Hot (and Adds Heat to Urban Areas)

More on mulch. Yes, the heat-island effect is a real thing. Urban areas are often 5 to 10 degrees hotter than surrounding areas because of all the concrete, asphalt and buildings. Too much impervious surface and lack of green space is not a good thing. But, gravel mulch is not part of the problem. It is pervious, allowing water to percolate in, which is a good thing. In fact, while the top of the gravel mulch may be

*Board
Supervisor
Needed*



The Douglas County Conservation District Board of Supervisors is composed of volunteers passionate about our mission to help people help the land.

We will have an opening on our Board in May 2022.

The time requirement is tied to our monthly meetings (4th Monday of each month at 6pm), our fund raising efforts in April, and a few workshops, if that interests the Board Member.

Please contact Heather for more information and to get involved.

hot, underneath, the soil and roots of the plant stay cooler than they would in wood chip mulch, and it conserves soil moisture very well – better than you might expect! So, half-inch size crusher (sharp, not rounded pea gravel) gravel laid 2-3” deep is excellent mulch for Co native plants. (2) In my yard, the plants in gravel mulch are doing better than the ones in wood mulch.

We Need Landscape Fabric/Weed Cloth to Keep Down the Weeds

One of my pet peeves of the landscaping trade is the use of plastic or other landscape fabric/ weed barrier cloth. It is an unsustainable practice that does not prevent weeds after about a year or two, and deprives the soil of beneficial processes. Let’s break it down. Soil is a living entity. It needs water and billions of tiny critters to be healthy. Putting any type of barrier down (aside from cardboard or newspaper, which breaks down over time) disrupts the natural cycles in the soil. And I know of zero projects where weed barrier has prevented weeds from sprouting. First, some of the harder perennial weeds to rid will eventually grow through the barrier. Second, many weeds will seed right on top of the barrier and their roots will become enmeshed in the fabric, making it much harder to get rid of them. Weed barrier is also a pain to cut into, if you are planting more plants. I’ve spent much of the past seven years digging out black plastic that somebody thought was a good idea in my yard. What I inherited was a weedy mess on top of the black plastic. Yikes. Just don’t use it! Properly applied mulch is a better option. The key to not using weed barrier is using the correct amount of mulch – not too deep and not too shallow. That will be the subject of an entire article, coming soon.

For the full article follow this [link](#).

Conservation District, Board of Supervisors Spotlight

Deb Hill is a longtime resident of Douglas County and lifelong educator. Deb retired to manage her family’s land with her husband Greg Stauffer. The family land is in the Douglas Land Conservancy, a local land-conservation organization. The property is part of an important wildlife corridor between Phillip S. Miller Park and Dawson Butte in Castle Rock. Deb feels that taking care of open spaces and wildlife is imperative to the survival of the planet. Deb states, “we all need the space to be in nature. As the county continues to grow it is important to help property owners be stewards of the land, regardless of the size of the space available to them.”

Deb loves to garden and usually produces way more than their family or neighbors can consume. Most days are spent outside, walking the hills with the pups or clearing brush and cleaning



Deb Hill is the Secretary of the Board of Supervisors

trees for fire mitigation. With all the firewood gathered the winter nights are spent in front of the wood stove with a good book.

Deb joined the Douglas County Conservation District Board of Supervisors in 2017 and is now



Deb in her abundant garden

the Board Secretary. Deb continues to impact our local youth by spearheading the Conservation District's College Scholarship Program. To date, this program has funded \$22,000 for 27 County residents to achieve higher education in a conservation related field. Those fields of study range from Agricultural Sciences to Environmental Sciences. Deb is currently serving the second term on the Conservation District Board.

What is the Douglas Land Conservancy?

Douglas Land Conservancy, or DLC, is a nonpolitical, nonprofit land trust dedicated to the protection and conservation of the natural character, habitats, ecosystems, and open space of Douglas County and other areas along the Front Range region of Colorado.



The DLC was formed in 1987 through a citizen initiative in response to alarming regional growth rates that far outpaced the rest of the country. DLC works in partnership with land owners, local governments, other conservation organizations and citizens to evaluate, accept and monitor conservation easements. These easements protect large tracts of open space from development for perpetuity. DLC has permanently preserved over 26,757 acres of open space in Douglas, Elbert and Jefferson County. DLC is Nationally Accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission and is a certified Land Trust in the State of Colorado.

A recent conservation property, the Sandstone Ranch is a 2,038-acre historic property the county bought in 2018 for more than \$18 million and is near Perry Park on the west side of Highway 105. The Schmidt property is 520 acres near West Jackson Creek Road and the Pike National Forest boundary. Sandstone Ranch's purchase price was shared by the County, GOCO (\$3.5 million) and CRMC (\$6 million). The Schmidt property was donated to the County in exchange for the conservation easement. The protection of the riparian area and wildlife

habitat on the Schmidt property will help mitigate habitat loss caused by the expansion of Chatfield Reservoir.

The Mile High Mamas describe Sandstone Ranch's spectacular views, expansive hay meadows, red rock formations, wildlife habitat, historic ranching operation, and 3.5 miles of common boundary with Pike National Forest, Sandstone Ranch is one of the crown jewels of all of the County's Open Space properties.



Mile High Mamas photo of Sandstone Ranch

College \$cholarships

Are you or someone you know headed to college? Your Conservation District awards a \$4,000 scholarship annually. Many of our scholarship recipients have gone on to have rewarding careers in the environmental and agricultural sciences. Check out our website for scholarship details.

Class Content for Teachers



The *Diggin My Doug* Program teaches kids about their deeper connection with their natural environment and is key to our mission. These interactive classes are available for FREE to teachers in the Douglas County School District. We have two versions to offer at this time: *Butterflies!* For grades K-2 led by Kathy Okon and *The Soil Food Web - A Party Beneath Your Feet*, curriculum produced by Jessica Goldstrohm of The Bees Waggle. Contact Heather for more information.

Educators Needed!

We are hiring educators, on a contractor basis, who are interested in teaching the *Soil Food Web - A Party Beneath Your Feet* curriculum, or any other aspect of conservation! Are you available during the school day to teach an aspect of conservation? Most classes are 30 to 45 minutes long for elementary grades.

Training and support is available. Must pass a background check. Contact Heather for details.

Events!

Additional opportunities can be found on our [Events Page](#) on [DouglasConserves.org](#) .

Tree & Windbreak Workshop

- Thurs, Jan 6, 5:30pm - 7:30pm, Franktown Fire House 181: 1959 N State Hwy 83, Franktown, CO 80116
- Offered in person and via Zoom
- Register by contacting Heather@DouglasConserves.org or call (303) 218 - 2622

In partnership with the Colorado State Forest Service - Franktown Field Office and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), in this workshop folks can learn about what trees grow well in our area and how to design a windbreak on their property. Come with questions for the Foresters and the NRCS team.

Native & Adaptive Plant Workshop

- Fri, Feb 25, 5:30pm - 7:30pm, CSU Extension Office: 410 Fairgrounds Rd #2699, Castle Rock, CO 80104
- Offered in person and via Zoom
- Register by contacting Heather@DouglasConserves.org or call (303) 218 - 2622

This workshop focuses on the benefits of using native and adaptive plants in your gardens; how to plant, how to maintain. This workshop is led by the Douglas County Master Gardeners.

Monthly Work Day on East Plum Creek

- Sat, Feb 12, 9 - 11am, CALF's Lowell Ranch: 2330 EAST Frontage Rd, Castle Rock, CO 80104
- Register by contacting Heather@DouglasConserves.org or call (303) 218 - 2622

We need your help to plant seeds, mulch plants, water, and maintain the restoration efforts on the stream restoration project. Bring the kids and come do some good in the great outdoors! **Free breakfast burritos to the first 5 who arrive!**



Grant\$

We offer cost-share grants for noxious weed mitigation and fire mitigation for properties in Douglas County. The maximum grant amount is \$500 for individuals. Grants are also available for Home Owners Associations. Grants are available in early January. Find grant applications [on our website](#).

Noxious weed mitigation is defined as controlling List A and B Noxious Weed Species, as defined by the [Colorado Department of Agriculture](#). Mitigation includes chemical applications by contractors, biocontrols for weeds such as goats or biological agents (insects for example) from the [Palisade Insectary](#).

Fire mitigation includes creating defensible space around a home through ladder-fuels removal and heavy-fuels reduction, creating tree-crown spacing via whole tree removal and brush removal. Contractor costs and equipment rental is covered under this grant.

Our grant cycle opens in January and closes in October, check out [our website](#) for applications.



Mini Grants are also available to Douglas County educators through the [Douglas County School District Office of Sustainability](#) . Contact Beth Church for details, bachurch@dcsdk12.org.

Annual Plant Sale!

Each year we hold our Annual Plant Sale fundraiser to earn money for local conservation programs like scholarships, grants, and workshops. Your support is appreciated!

Our plant offerings are from local nurseries and the Colorado State Forest Service Nursery. We offer both native and adaptive plants at reasonable prices. We offer seedling trees, gallon perennials, shrubs, and up to 5 gallon size trees and shrubs.

Plants are sold on a pre-sale basis from October to spring, with plants picked up by customers in the spring. We have a one-day pick up event for customers to pick up their plants on Friday, April 15. Note that because we sell both trees and perennials, the perennials will need to be kept indoors until the appropriate planting time. All plants are sold online through [our online shop](#). Thanks for your support!

Shrubs of the Front Range

There are so many shrubs here in the Front Range to love. We've picked a couple here to highlight for their year round interest and wildlife habitat. Wildlife habitat is important as described by the National Wildlife Federation as, "Human activity has changed and eliminated habitat, locally, and on the global scale, and birds, butterflies, and other wildlife are pushed into ever-shrinking wilderness areas.

You can make a difference. You can invite wildlife back to your own yard and neighborhood by planting a simple garden that provides habitat. Imagine your garden teeming with singing songbirds, colorful butterflies, flitting hummingbirds, and other small wildlife.

Providing a sustainable habitat for wildlife begins with your plants. That's why we call it a wildlife habitat "garden." When you plant the native plant species that wildlife depend on, you create habitat and begin to restore your local environment. Adding water sources, nesting boxes, and other habitat features enhances the habitat value of your garden to wildlife. By choosing natural gardening practices, you make your yard a safe place for wildlife." Follow this link for the full article - <https://www.nwf.org/garden-for-wildlife/create>.

These shrubs are available for purchase through our [Annual Plant Sale](#) online. Proceeds fund conservation programs in our area.

First up is the **Golden Currant**, *Ribes aureum* which may reach 7' height by 6' wide in ideal conditions. Provides year round interest and year round Food Web Value; springtime bright-yellow blossoms, berries in summer, bright red foliage in the fall and the berries will hang on into the winter making great forage for birds and small mammals. Hummingbirds to butterflies will enjoy the nectar of the flowers, as well. Ground-dwelling birds and small mammals can nest and forage in the understory. Native to the west, this hardy shrub is drought tolerant and needs full sun to thrive. Golden Currents also make an interesting hedge.

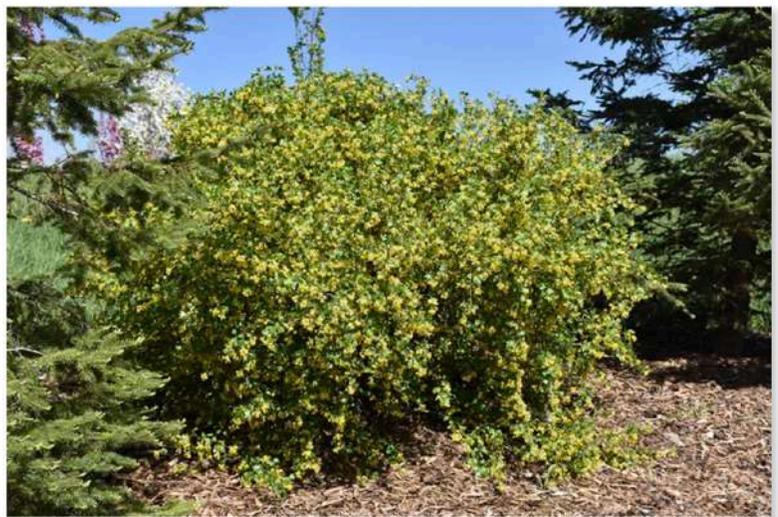


Photo from Eagle Lake Nurseries

Golden Current is best grown in

organically rich, fertile, medium moisture, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade. This plant tolerates a wide range of soils ranging from dry to seasonally flooded ones. Tolerates poor soils, clay soils and drought. Prefers consistent and even moisture. Avoid overhead watering. Some part afternoon shade is appreciated in hot summer climates, but fewer flowers and fruits are usually produced in part shade conditions. Appreciates a good organic mulch for the root zone. Propagate by cuttings or seed. Spreads by suckers to form colonies in optimum growing conditions. Prune in the spring to encourage vigorous growth as needed.



Photo from National Parks Service, Golden Current in fall

Edible landscapes are great if you want to practice your gardening and kitchen skills. [Golden Currant Pilaf](#) with Cinnamon is a great way to put those currants to good use. This recipe calls for onion, rice, broth, currants, turmeric, cinnamon and fresh parsley for a savory and slightly sweet dish. A variety of jellies and chutney recipes are available online too.

For more details on the Golden Current, check out [Missouri Botanical Garden](#).

Next up is **Apache Plume**, *Fallugia paradoxa* which may reach 5' height by 5' wide in ideal conditions. This shrub is chosen for its showy habit and long lasting flowers, useful pink seed heads, and its high Food Web Value. Spring through summer brings apple blossom-like white flowers that set fluffy-pink seed heads. This upright, deciduous to semi-evergreen, multi-branched shrub has dark green leaves that contrast well with the pink and white of the flowers and seed heads.

Birds use the seed heads for nest making and for forage. Butterflies and native bees appreciate the nectar spring through summer. Apache Plume provides cover for small mammals and ground-dwelling birds year round.

Preferring dry, well-drained soils this plant is useful in erosion control due to its suckering habit. Apache Plume also spreads by seed. Cut oldest woody stems to the ground to rejuvenate. Female plants produce flowers and berries.

Apache Plume is drought tolerant and native to the West. Preferring full sun to reach its potential. This shrub is also a good hedge maker when planted en masse. The dried seed heads are great used in crafts and make lovely additions to cut flower arrangements.

For more information on Apache Plume, check out Wildflower.org.

Sources for this article are from The Front Range Native Plants by the Colorado Native Plant Society, Wildflower.org, and the Missouri Botanical Garden.



Photo from High County Gardens, Apache Plume



Photo from Gardenia, Apache Plume

These plants and others can be purchased through the Annual Plant Sale at DouglasConserves.org/Shop. Proceeds go toward local conservation programs. **Thank you for your interest and support.**

The U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service is an equal opportunity employer.